Gig Harbor Net Sheds
Gig Harbor
Pierce County
Washington

HAER WA-186
HAER WA-186

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN ENGINEERING RECORD
National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior
1849 C Street NW
Washington, DC 20240-0001

HISTORIC AMERICAN ENGINEERING RECORD

GIG HARBOR NET SHEDS

HAER No. WA-186

Location: Gig Harbor, Pierce County, Washington

Dates of Construction: Various, see individual reports

Builders: Various, see individual reports

Present Owner: Various, see individual reports

Present Use: Various, see individual reports

Significance: The seventeen extant net sheds in Gig Harbor, Washington, are significant as remnants of the community's cultural heritage and economic development. Families, mostly of Croatian ancestry, have passed down the net sheds and fishing vessels for several generations. Many of the extant net sheds are an integral part of successful commercial fishing operations and are used for storing and mending fishing nets as well as repairing the equipment used on commercial vessels. Except for the remaining commercial fishing boats in the harbor, net sheds are the only surviving architectural connection between the community and what was once one of the most successful fishing fleets on the West Coast.

Historian: Shelley Leavens, summer 2009

Project Information: The City of Gig Harbor has taken steps to provide incentives for property owners who retain historic net sheds, and in 2006, conducted a general survey of the seventeen extant structures lining the harbor's waterfront. In 2008, Mildred Andrews of the Andrews Group completed an independent survey of Gig Harbor's historic downtown. The city secured grant funds from the Washington State Department of Archaeology and Historic Preservation to document the net sheds with the Historic American Engineering Record (HAER), a division of the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior in 2009. Todd Croteau, HAER Maritime Program, supervised the documentation team, which consisted of Brian Diveley and Shelly Leavens, both Sally Kress Tompkins Maritime Documentation Interns. A survey team of students from Bates Technical College in Tacoma, Washington, also lent support to the documentation effort. The documentation

team's liaison to the net shed owners is the City of Gig Harbor's Special Projects Coordinator, Lita Dawn Stanton.

Other net sheds documented as part of the Gig Harbor Net Shed survey include the following:

Gig Harbor Net Sheds	HAER No. WA-186
Gilich Net Shed	HAER No. WA-186-A
Morin Net Shed	HAER No. WA-186-B
Bujacich Net Shed	HAER No. WA-186-C
Ivanovich Net Shed	HAER No WA-186-D
Ancich-Tarabochia Net Shed	HAER No. WA-186-E
Ancich Net Shed	HAER No. WA-186-F
Castelan-Jerkovich Net Shed	HAER No. WA-186-G
Puratich Net Shed	HAER No. WA-186-H
Stanich Net Shed	HAER No. WA-186-I
Gilich Net Shed	HAER No. WA-186-J
Novak Net Shed	HAER No. WA-186-K
Ross Net Shed	HAER No. WA-186-L
Skansie Brothers Net Shed	HAER No. WA-186-M
Babich Net Shed (Rickard)	HAER No. WA-186-N
Babich Net Shed (Pont)	HAER No. WA-186-O
Skansie Net Shed	HAER No. WA-186-P
Mojean Net Shed	HAER No. WA-186-Q

Why Gig Harbor?

Called both the "Gateway to the Olympic Peninsula" and "Washington's Maritime Village," Gig Harbor is situated geographically at the confluence of mountains and sound and culturally at the bridge of urban and rural life. Located in the southern Puget Sound area of the Salish Sea, on the Kitsap Peninsula, Gig Harbor is 1 mile long from its southern 200' passage entrance to its northern inner harbor. Its protected waters, central proximity to Tacoma industries to the south, and access to the abundant fisheries of the San Juan Islands and British Columbia to the north made Gig Harbor an ideal location for commercial purse seine fishing in the early twentieth century.

Samuel Jerisich, along with John Farrague and Peter Goldsmith, rowed from Vancouver Island into Gig Harbor in 1867. They found the area already inhabited by Native Americans from the Puyallup, Nisqually, and Squaxin tribes. Jerisich, Farrague, and Goldsmith immediately fell in love with the harbor and convinced their families and friends to join them there. As the initial families arrived, they quickly laid claim to plots along the shore and began utilizing the abundant local lumber to build houses, boats, and docks. Following the Native American's example, they processed dogfish oil to sell to surrounding towns (it was used as an industrial lubricant and in oil lamps) and fished for salmon. Sawmills, boatbuilding yards, and farms flourished in Gig Harbor during the 1880s and 1890s, but the early Croatian immigrants, including the Jerisich, Dorotich, and Novak families, were primarily attracted by the abundance of salmon in the Puget Sound. Aided by the salmon canneries and the boat yards producing rowing skiffs, and later, gillnetters and purse seiners, they quickly established themselves as leaders in the industry. Fishing was more than a business, it was also a way of life.[1]

In a 1982 report on the historic properties of Gig Harbor, historian Caroline Gallacci wrote,

> early development was dependent upon lumber mills, the establishment of a major Puget Sound boatyard, and the establishment of the headquarters for the salmon fishing fleet in the harbor. The economic, social and religious institutions created by Yugoslavian, German and Scandinavian settlers allowed the community to also become the major town serving the agricultural hinterland of the Gig Harbor Peninsula.[2]

The Gig Harbor Net Sheds reflect the development of Gig Harbor as well as the preeminence of fishing in this area.

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[1] Mildred Andrews and Julie Koler, "Historical Overview," in "The Andrews Group Report," The Andrews Group, 2008.
[2] Caroline Gallicci, "Net Shed (PC-133-4a)," Pierce County Cultural Resource Survey, 1982.

Croatian Ancestry

Croatian heritage is an integral part of the history and present day milieu of the Gig Harbor net sheds. Croatian immigrants are credited with bringing the fishing method of purse seining to the Puget Sound. The islands dotting the eastern Adriatic coast of Croatia, known as Dalmatia, have fostered generations of fishermen. Croatia, formerly part of Yugoslavia, is the ancestral home to most of the fishing families that settled in Gig Harbor and established businesses there, some of which are still in operation. Many of the third generation fishermen noted that their grandfathers immigrated directly to the Puget Sound area from the island of Brač, many going through a Croatian boarding house in Tacoma before settling in Gig Harbor.[3]

By and large, traditional gender roles within the Croatian families and the fishing industry dictated that only men and boys worked in and around the net sheds and on the boats. In the early 1900s, the wives of the Croatian fishermen would set up camps and cook for those participating in longer fishing expeditions in the San Juan Islands. Generally, however, the women of the fishing families managed the home and had little involvement in the fishing business itself or with the net shed and fishing equipment. Boys often began working on the fishing boats with their fathers at the ages of 12 to 14 and were expected to learn the trade. Eventually, the eldest son would take over the family business and associated property, including any boats and net sheds.

The relationship of the net sheds to Croatian building techniques and forms is unknown. According to oral histories conducted with fishermen, similar shoreline net sheds are not found in Croatia. The net sheds seem to be designed specifically for the conditions of Gig Harbor and to meet the needs of the local fishermen.

Fishing from Gig Harbor

Historically, fishermen worked the local waters as well as the San Juan Islands to the north. The decline in catch, due to a number of factors outlined later in this report, has forced fishermen to travel north to Alaska and south to California in order to maintain viable commercial fishing businesses.

Historian Mildred Andrews states, "early fishing boats were large rowboats with four oarsmen on each side. Until the 1910s, fishermen often banded together and hired a steamboat to tow their long string of rowboats north for trips that sometimes lasted as long as six weeks."[4] The primary catch was salmon, but now the Gig Harbor commercial vessels catch a variety of fish, including Pollock, sardines, cod, Dungeness crab, and squid. Gig Harbor fishermen historically operated purse seiners, although a fleet of

[3] Andrews and Koler, "Historical Overview."
[4] Andrews and Koler, "Historical Overview."

gillnetters was active in Gig Harbor. Purse seiners are still in use, and a few gillnetters remain.

The purse seine is so-called because when the rope that passes through a series of rings is pulled, the rings are drawn together. This results in the fish being trapped in the net. Before the advent of the mechanized power block to haul seine nets (described in further detail below), fishermen would operate each purse seiner with a crew of eight to ten men. Their tasks included preparing the nets for the season, which involved repairing any holes and tarring, drying, and loading the nets onto boats. During the fishing season, the young men making up the crew would work as deckhands and take care of all the tasks on board during a "set," referring to a single operation of the purse seine that is intended to result in a catch of fish. Examples of these tasks were detaching the seine skiff, plunging to scare fish into the net, cleaning seaweed and bycatch from the deck, assisting with brailing (scooping the fish aboard at the end of a set), and stacking the cork line and lead line as the net was hauled aboard.

The nets were a vital component of the operation. The purse seine nets were originally made from heavy cotton. Since the cotton deteriorated quickly, it had to be dipped in tar and set out to dry. Some families in Gig Harbor specialized in tarring nets, such as one operation called "Tarabochia's Tar Pots." The nets would be laid out in large fields to dry. Evidence of net maintenance can be found in dripped tar from nets along the original floorboards of many of the sheds. With the advent of synthetic nylon in the 1940s, more manageable nylon nets eventually replaced the unwieldy cotton ones in the early 1950s. Historically, the cotton nets were equipped with cork floats strung along the cork line and lead weights strung along the lead line. Corks are now made from plastic. The typical length of a purse seine net is 1,200' long x 40' deep. When piled onboard, the nets are about the size of a large pickup truck, and both cotton and nylon nets are very heavy. The introduction of a mechanized power block made the process of managing the nets easier and ultimately reduced the size of the crew needed to operate a purse seiner.

Mario Puratić's 'Power Block' and The Boldt Decision

Two major elements impacting the story of Croatian commercial fishing based in Gig Harbor, and thus tied to the story of the net sheds, are the development of the Puretic Power Block and the 1974 Boldt Decision. Both were cited numerous times by fishermen during interviews with the author of this report as being noteworthy events.

Mario Puratić was born in 1917 in Sumartin, Croatia, on the island of Brač. Puratić, which was later Americanized to Puretic, was an immigrant tuna fisherman in California who obtained a number of patents for fishing-related equipment and processes. In addition to the power block, he also received patents for a "Method and Apparatus for Shipboard Storage and Refrigeration of Freshly Caught Fish," "Marine Propulsion Unit,"

"Net Retriever Apparatus," and "Fishing Vessel."[5] He revolutionized the method of pulling fishing nets onto a purse seine boat with his development of the "Puretic Power Block" in 1954.[6] This particular type of power block is a large mechanized aluminum winch and rubber coated sheave that is affixed to the stern of the boat or at the water-facing end of a net shed to haul and manage nets for storage. An article originally published in *Fishing News International* noted the Puretic power block "has mechanized the hauling of nets in the tuna, anchovy, sardine, herring, menhaden, pilchard, mackerel and salmon fisheries" and had been used on a number of vessel types. This invention "became the linchpin in the mechanization of purse seining" and "combined with fluid hydraulic power technology and new large, synthetic nets, it changed the whole character of purse seine fishing."[7] MARCO of Seattle, Washington, developed the power block, and salmon seiners in Puget Sound were quick to adopt this technology. As promised by the patent, the power block reduced the number of crew necessary to fish successfully, resulting in increased catch and overall bottom line. Seiners could fish with crews of five, including the skipper who ran the business. In addition, the power block reduced the amount of damage to the nets and was more efficient.

Secondly, the Boldt Decision, cited to be one of the most significant decisions in the history of Indian Law, was also noted by multiple active fishermen in interviews as having a major impact on the fishing industry and their own family businesses. Judge George Boldt presided over the 1974 United States vs. Washington case. It related to tribal fishing in and around the Puget Sound, which was at the time less than 5 percent of the total catch. Non-native fishermen still viewed the tribes' fishing rights as competing against their own business endeavors and with declining fish numbers, tribes were increasingly persecuted by local law enforcement and general harassment.[8] The Boldt Decision was especially significant because while the Native American tribes of Washington State already had limited fishing rights, it affirmed these rights and

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[5] See M.J. Puretic, "Method and Apparatus for Shipboard Storage and Refrigeration of Freshly Caught Fish," Patent No. 2,982,109, Awarded May 16, 1961; M.J. Puretic, "Marine Propulsion Unit," Patent No. 3,469,558, Awarded September 30, 1969; "Net Retriever Apparatus," Patent No. 3,469,819, Awarded September 30, 1969; M.J. Puretic, "Fishing Vessel," Patent No. 3,261,316, Awarded July 19, 1966. Full text of all patents available online at http://www.uspto.gov/.

[6] The patents relating to the power block include the following:
M.J. Puretic, "Method of Operating a Purse Seine with a Power Block Unit," Patent No. 2,733,530, Awarded February 7, 1956. This patent was for a "method of using a power operated device whereby roundhaul seines, particularly purse seines, may be drawn from the sea onto the boat deck."
M.J. Puretic, "Net Handling Apparatus," Patent No. 2,733,531, Awarded February 7, 1956. The "net handling apparatus" refers to the Puretic power block.
M.J. Puretic, "Net and Long Line Retrieving Device and Method of Using Same," Patent No. 2,810,980, Awarded October 29, 1957. This was another type of power block developed for use with nets and long lines with hooks.
An improvement to the original Puretic power block was filed by Puretic, by then living in Florida, on June 9, 1970. The patent, No. 3,643,921, was awarded on February 22, 1972.

[7] "MARCO, the Puretic Power Bock, and Purse Seining," originally published in *Fishing News International* and available from http://www.marcoglobal.com/pdf/History_MARCO_FNI.pdf, accessed July 2010.

[8] Alex Tizon, "25 Years after the Boldt Decision: The fish tale that changed history," *The Seattle Times*, February 25, 1999.

reinterpreted the 1854 and 1855 treaties granting these rights. In his final ruling Judge Boldt stated, "By dictionary definition and as intended and used in the Indian treaties and in this decision, 'in common with' means sharing equally the opportunity to take fish…therefore non-treaty fishermen shall have the opportunity to take up to 50% of the harvestable number of fish…and treaty fishermen shall have the opportunity to take up to that same percentage."[9]

In a much later related decision it was ruled that Native American tribes who had not signed the Treaty of Olympia, the Chehalis in particular, would not have their harvest of fish attributed to the treaty-bound tribes share. Instead their share would be distributed under the umbrella of the State of Washington, further diluting the share of non-native fishing.[10] At the time, the decision was met with shock and dismay by the non-native fishermen because it would result in a larger restriction of their percentage of the season's catch. The interviews conducted as part of the Gig Harbor Net Sheds survey by the author of this report demonstrated that the Boldt Decision was clearly still a sore point for the Gig Harbor fishermen. They cited the decision as the major cause of their need to diversify their fishing operations and thus fish more months out of the year. Subsequently the same principles applying to the Boldt Decision have been applied to other resources, such as shellfish.

The Net Sheds

The Washington Trust for Historic Preservation listed the Gig Harbor Sheds on its Most Endangered Historic Properties List in 2008, stating

> next to the fishing vessels themselves, net sheds represent the most important architectural byproduct of the commercial fishing industry for Gig Harbor. With commercial fishing as the predominant industry, easy access to land for loading and unloading gear was essential. Modest docks built on wood piles developed along the waterfront and in many cases the family home was constructed behind these net sheds. In addition to workplaces, these simple wood piers and covered structures served as gathering places for skippers, crews and their families.[11]

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[9] U.S. District Judge George Boldt, U.S. v. Washington, February 12, 1974.
[10] United States v. Washington, see Lewis & Clark Law School, Environmental Law online, available at http://www.elawreview.org/summaries/natural_resources/native_american_issues/united_states_v_washington.html, accessed 2009.
[11] "Living on the Edge: Most Endangered Historic Properties List – 2008," Washington Trust for Historic Preservation, 2008.

The vernacular net sheds are generally plank-on-frame rectangular structures set on pilings, with gabled roofs and exposed rafter tails. Most of them are oriented perpendicular to the harbor, with only two sheds oriented parallel to the shoreline due to their location at the mouth of the bay. The single exterior plank walls are not insulated, and there are usually four to six small, single-light casement windows along each side wall. The gabled roofs are either shingle or corrugated tin and cover large timber rafters from which the nets were hung and other tools were stored. The entrance to each shed is made from the shoreline by a ramp. A sliding door opens to the interior, which historically consisted of one room, although many have been modified by the addition of partitions. The interior finishes were usually rough-hewn plank walls and floors set against a simple, exposed timber frame. The facades of the net sheds facing the harbor generally open to a partially-covered dock. Several sheds have walkways along one or both sides of the shed to reach the dock. More recently, many shed owners have installed low floats to provide access to boats regardless of the tides.

Most of the extant sheds in the harbor were built between the 1930s and the 1960s. The oldest shed was reportedly built in 1907 and has been added to in phases (see Mojean Net Shed, HAER No. WA-186-Q). According to oral histories and photographic evidence, there may have been more than twenty sheds along the shoreline at the peak of the harbor's fishing industry development, but many of the original sheds either burned down or were torn down for other uses. Of those that burned, some were re-built and now make up the sixteen sheds comprising this survey.

According to current net shed owners (none of whom built the sheds themselves), the fishermen and boat builders in the area designed the sheds and built them of local wood, usually Douglas fir. Despite accounts of them being built quickly and cheaply, many of the extant sheds have been successfully renovated or maintained for continued use. Depending on the work necessary to maintain the sheds, it would be done by the fishermen themselves or by local contractors. Several shed owners reported that every spring a pile driver would make his rounds to replace pilings as necessary, though this is no longer the case.

Historically the sheds were built on the family property, which included an upland house and land for a garden or orchard. Good remaining examples of this are the Babich sheds (HAER Nos. WA-186-N and WA-186-O), each of which still have an associated house and orchard along the shoreline. The net shed's primary purpose was to serve as a place to hang and dry nets and store other fishing gear, but a few of the sheds have areas partitioned off for a kitchen or office space. Each was also equipped with a pit toilet that would empty directly into the harbor. Evidence of these toilets remains, but they are not currently in use.

The sheds see the most active use in the months leading up to the salmon fishing season, usually April through June. The nets must be sorted, repaired, and prepared for loading onto the boats. Other repairs to the boats are made from the sheds, which are equipped with machine shops and woodworking tools. Before low floats and ramps were installed

extending into the harbor from the sheds, the boats could only access the sheds at high tide. Otherwise boats would be moored in the center of the harbor or tied up along public docks towards the mouth of the harbor where the tide is not as variable. Two extant sheds closer to the mouth of the harbor are not affected by minus tides so the owners can keep their boats tied to the dock (see Skansie Net Shed, HAER No. WA-186-P and Mojean Net Shed, HAER No. WA-186-Q). At the currently operating net sheds, more than one purse seiner is usually tied to the low floating dock and utilizing the work space of the shed. Additionally, several sheds have evidence of underwater rails alongside the shed, where in low tide, a boat could be brought up onto the rails for hull inspection and maintenance. These are no longer used.

Several net sheds that are still in use (see Puratich Net Shed, HAER No. WA-186-H and Morin Net Shed, HAER No. WA-186-B for example) house workshops and some net storage. Besides drying, storing and repairing nets, a few of the sheds were also used as a social gathering places and business offices. However, for some fishermen with large commercial operations, current storage needs are not fulfilled by a single net shed in Gig Harbor, and it is therefore necessary to have storage in ports up and down the West Coast. The Puratich brothers (see HAER No. WA-186-H) estimated that 90 percent of their fishing gear (mostly nets) is stored elsewhere along the coast. While these fishing operations have clearly outgrown the size of a single net shed's storage space (many also have large inland net sheds built on cheaper land), their continued use of the Gig Harbor sheds represent their efforts to keep their businesses local to the community their families have helped establish and keep their ancestral traditions alive.

Threats to the Net Sheds

As industrialization swept the nation in the early part of the twentieth century, Gig Harbor continued to operate as a fairly secluded fishing community. Primary access to and from Gig Harbor was by steam vessels and eventually a passenger ferry. However, the opening of the first Narrows Bridge, completed in July 1940 and linking the peninsula to Tacoma, made the community more accessible. The bridge acquired the nickname "Galloping Gertie" after it twisted and collapsed in a windstorm just four months after its completion. Another Narrows Bridge opened to traffic 1950 and resulted in all ferry service to and from Gig Harbor ceasing. The opening of the bridge led to additional real estate and commercial development in the community, making it a suburb of Tacoma.

While the City of Gig Harbor recognizes the historic significance of the sixteen net sheds in this study and gives net shed owners incentives to retain and maintain their properties, there are impending threats to several. The Croatian fishing families' involvement in the industry has dwindled or moved elsewhere. As the city develops, the net sheds are seen as either economically viable or a liability. Many of these simple structures with deep heritage and familial significance are still used and cherished, though some are left derelict, while others are sold to developers.

The fishing families and their properties highlighted by this report have been primarily affected by the development of the town in terms of the tourist industry, burgeoning retirement community, and shoreline development. These factors have forced the value of coveted shoreline property in Gig Harbor to rise sharply within the last twenty-five years. The rise in property values led to higher property taxes, which the fishermen have found difficult to pay, especially those who are retired and no longer using the net sheds as active commercial spaces. As a result three of the net sheds have been renovated as commercial rentals, either as storage space or offices, in order to bring in income (see, for example, Ancich-Tarabochia Net Shed, HAER No. WA-186-E and Stanich Net Shed, HAER No. WA-186-I). Two net sheds are currently recreational gathering places, one has been converted to a restaurant, one a marina gathering place, and another transformed to condos (see, for example, Gilich Net Shed, HAER No. WA-186-J; Castelan-Jerkovich Net Shed, HAER No. WA-186-G; and Novak Net Shed, HAER No. WA-186-K). These are all ways the sheds have been able to remain in the community, but through transformative adaptive reuse as opposed to the route of preserving their historical aesthetic and cultural relevance.

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